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SUBJECT: SENATOR LUGAR'S MEETING WITH KING MOHAMMED

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for Reasons 1.4. (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Senator Lugar met for 40 minutes with King Mohammed the afternoon of August 19 in Tetouan, northern Morocco. The King thanked Senator Lugar for US intervention in freeing the remaining POWs from Tindouf. Lugar encouraged the King to use the release as an opportunity to make progress on Moroccan-Algerian relations. He suggested in particular that the King make a gesture to Bouteflika, either in public remarks, privately, or by re-scheduling the visit to Morocco of the Algerian PM. The King promised to keep working on better relations with Algeria and suggested that reviving a quiet channel to the GOA through Algerian Chief of Staff Belkheir might be helpful, though he said he was not optimistic that Algeria was ready to engage seriously. Lugar encouraged the King to present a revised autonomy plan to new SRSG Van Walsum. The King praised the FTA and said the US should have no illusions about Morocco's Islamists; behind their benign facade, they were all anti-American. General Jones noted NATO efforts in the region and expressed hope to strengthen Med Dialogue. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Participants

US

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Ambassador Riley
Senator Lugar
EUCOM Supreme Allied Commander General Jones

GOM

King Mohammed VI
FM Benaissa
Deputy FM Fassi Fihri

¶3. (C) King Mohammed greeted Senator Lugar solo, as FM Benaissa, and Deputy FM Fassi Fihri entered the room separately. The King welcomed Lugar and thanked him and the US for their efforts in freeing the POWs. The King said that in spite of everything (likely referring to earlier GOM concerns about the timing and staging of the POW release as a "fait accompli"), he was pleased the prisoners were home.

¶4. (C) Lugar handed the King the original copy of President Bush's August 15 letter to the King. The King said he was pleased to have Lugar in Morocco. He knew the US was disappointed that there had not been more progress over the last year or more in relations between Morocco and Algeria, or more positive steps between the two countries. The King wanted to reassure the US that Morocco had been doing everything it could to improve relations with Algeria. The King related that he had traveled to Algiers in April, had extended his stay, and done everything he could to move the relationship between the two countries forward. Morocco had received nothing in return. In English, the King said, "I felt like a beggar" returning from Algiers.

¶5. (C) Lugar encouraged the King not to give up and wondered whether there was not some "small thing" Morocco could do to give the relationship a boost. Lugar said he knew at one point the GOM had invited the Algerian PM to Morocco; he didn't know the full background, but he encouraged the King to restart this initiative, or do something comparable such as exchange visits at the foreign minister level. Noting why he had refused in the end to attend the aborted Arab Maghreb Union summit in May, the King said he had to be attentive to the opinions and views of the Moroccan people. The Western Sahara means a lot to the Moroccan people, the King said, but it does not mean anything to the people of Algeria. The Algerian government can say whatever it wants about the issue, "but I have to be careful." The Algerian leadership had made very provocative comments before the AMU summit, leaving the King no choice but to decline to participate.

¶6. (C) The King continued that he had taken a number of steps to work with the Algerians. We asked for a secret envoy, the King said -- perhaps Presidential COS Belkheir, who has served this role in the past -- but it was refused. I made the request again, the King said, and it was refused again. Nevertheless, we are willing to try a third time.

Lugar told the King that in his meeting with President Bouteflika the previous day, the Algerian President had stressed that the Western Sahara was not a causus belli with Morocco, that he was willing to work toward a resolution to the dispute, and that he was open to a broad interpretation of "referendum," including incorporating many "Moroccans" who would be eligible to vote in a referendum, based on Wilsonian principles of self-determination. Testily, the King replied he had a suggestion for Bouteflika: Let's try a pilot referendum, he said, with the separatists in the Kabylie region in Algeria and see how that works.

¶ 17. (C) In spite of these problems, the King said he was looking forward to receiving the new SRSG (turning to Fassi Fihri for Van Walsum's name). The King quipped that he better remember Van Walsum's name if they were going to meet in September. Lugar said the Moroccans could present Van Walsum with a new autonomy plan for the Western Sahara. The King said there had not been much success with this in the past, noting that he had met with UNSYG Annan, but he hoped a dialogue could start with the UN.

¶ 18. (C) Sitting back, the King observed that the key to the Western Sahara conflict lies between Morocco and Algeria, and there must be efforts to improve dialogue between the two countries. Morocco expected a gesture from Algeria, after the many gestures Morocco had made with nothing in return. Nevertheless, Morocco would keep trying. Lugar thanked the King for being patient. The King reiterated that public opinion on the Western Sahara issue really does matter in Morocco, whereas it does not in Algeria. He could not carry through on the AMU summit given the negative atmosphere the Algerians created.

¶ 19. (C) Not responding to the idea of getting an Algerian PM visit on track, the King reiterated that Belkheir could be a possible channel to the GOA (comment: the King made no reference to the fact that Belkheir is apparently in line to be Algeria's next ambassador to Morocco). He said he would call Bouteflika and make an effort to get things started again. Lugar appreciated the King's commitment and understood that tensions between the two countries sometimes crescendoed at awkward times. Lugar said he understood that USD 3 billion in revenue was lost every year because of illegal trade across the closed Morocco-Algeria border, and no one but a handful of illicit traders were being helped by that kind of commerce. The King said that Bouteflika's fear is that if we opened the border, millions of Algerians will come to Morocco, but no Moroccans will go to Algeria. The King concluded that the Algerians are just not ready to make serious progress in their relations with Morocco, but Morocco would keep trying, even though he was not optimistic. He appreciated US engagement in this area, hoping it would continue to be strong, and the mutual friendship between Morocco and the US.

FTA and MCC

¶ 10. (C) Lugar told the King he had met with PM Jettou that morning (septel) and learned more about Morocco's proposal to the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). While he had not yet seen the details of the proposal, Lugar said he followed the work of the MCC closely and understood Morocco had a good proposal. Lugar said going after poverty was very important. Lugar hoped the US-Morocco Free Trade Agreement would remain on track for January 1 implementation. The King said everyone in Morocco was in the end very impressed with the FTA and happy about it. Referring to a roundtable discussion earlier that day in Rabat (septel), Lugar said he had a very interesting, thoughtful, and energetic discussion with opinion leaders and influential Moroccans. "Some members of parliament" (referring to the PJD's Lahcen Daoudi), Lugar said, were very skeptical of the FTA. The King rolled his eyes at the mention of the Islamist PJD. He said I must tell you something important. When you are talking about Islamists, whether moderates or extremists, they are all anti-American. Don't be fooled, the King warned, just because they sound reasonable and seem very nice. They sound rational. The US should have no illusions about them, however; they are anti-American.

¶ 11. (C) The King said Morocco was already seeing results from the FTA. Spain was already making investments. The French were not so happy about the FTA, the King acknowledged; they are not as entrepreneurial. The Spanish are interested in taking advantage of the FTA.

Med Dialogue

¶ 12. (C) Senator Lugar told the King he was pleased General Jones could join him on this important mission to Morocco and turned the floor over to the General. General Jones thanked the King for the meeting. He noted the importance of NATO activities in the region and welcomed the strong military

cooperation between the US and Morocco. He hoped to see Med Dialogue strengthened in the future and encouraged Morocco's increased participation.

¶13. (C) The King closed by saying he hoped he would see President Bush before long, as they had not seen each other since last summer. The 50th anniversary of Moroccan independence was coming up in 2006, and the country was already planning commemorative events. As a result, the King would probably not be able to see President Bush this year, but he hoped it would not be too long. Lugar thanked the King again for his hospitality and the many arrangements made to make his mission to Morocco a success.

¶14. (C) Senator Lugar did not have a chance to clear this cable before departing post.

RILEY